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| Basil Wright (1907-1987) |
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| Basil Wright was a prominent figure in the British documentary film movement. He attended the first screening of John Grierson’s *Drifters*, which amplified his desire to pursue filmmaking. Grierson admired Wright’s amateur film work and made him one of the first recruits in November 1929 for the Empire Marketing Board’s film unit. He wholeheartedly took to Grierson’s definition of documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” a sort of tightrope act that balanced aesthetic experimentation with a commitment to capturing the gritty realities of everyday life in various settings and industries. Keenly aware of the tension between aesthetics and public education that underwrote the documentary enterprise, Wright nonetheless believed the successful documentary “illumines the fundamental problem of human kind with a realism which rises above reportage or exposition to the pinnacle of aesthetic completeness and creative satisfaction” (“Documentary Dilemma” 325). |
| Basil Wright was a prominent figure in the British documentary film movement. He attended the first screening of John Grierson’s *Drifters*, which amplified his desire to pursue filmmaking. Grierson admired Wright’s amateur film work and made him one of the first recruits in November 1929 for the Empire Marketing Board’s film unit. He wholeheartedly took to Grierson’s definition of documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” a sort of tightrope act that balanced aesthetic experimentation with a commitment to capturing the gritty realities of everyday life in various settings and industries. Keenly aware of the tension between aesthetics and public education that underwrote the documentary enterprise, Wright nonetheless believed the successful documentary “illumines the fundamental problem of human kind with a realism which rises above reportage or exposition to the pinnacle of aesthetic completeness and creative satisfaction” (“Documentary Dilemma” 325).  Wright directed and produced a considerable number of films, but his 1934 film, *Song of Ceylon*, produced for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board,is considered his highest achievement. Assembled into four acts, Wright’s film draws on montage techniques from Soviet avant-garde cinema and importantly experimented with asynchronic sound, juxtaposing sounds from Western sources with images of Ceylonese labourers to make legible the British empire’s vast network of economic production. The film fetched the *Prix du Gouvernement* at the International Film Festival in Brussels in 1935. If *Song of Ceylon* marks Wright’s highpoint, it did not signal the end of his role in documentary film more broadly. He had a hand in producing *Night Mail* as well as key war documentaries *London Can Take It!* and *A Diary for Timothy*. He served as a film critic for *The Spectator* in 1938. He collaborated with Grierson on *World Film News* and helped launch its successor *Documentary Newsletter* before moving to the United States where he held teaching posts at several universities. |
| Further reading:  Aitken, Ian. (1990) *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement.* NY: Routledge.  Guynn, William. (1998) “The Art of National Projection: Basil Wright’s *Song of Ceylon.” Documenting the Documentary*, eds Barry K. Grant and Janet Sloniowski. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.  Wright, Basil. (1948) *The Uses of Film*. Oxford: Bodley Head.  ---. (1951) “The Documentary Dilemma.” *Hollywood Quarterly* 5:4: 321-25.  ---. (1974) *The Long View: An International History of Cinema*. London: Secker and Warburg. |